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A LITTLE AGGRESSION GETS YOU EVERYWHERE

Ryanair was in trouble again last week. Chief executive Michael O'Leary was forced to apologise to easyJet founder, Sir Stelios Haji-Ioannou, for depicting him in a January ad campaign as a Pinocchio who misleads clients about punctuality. To avoid a court case, Ryanair agreed to pay Sir Stelios' costs and damages of £50,000 which will be donated to a charity of the easyJet founder's choosing. Stelios joined in by claiming O'Leary was the "ugly face of capitalism".

The "ugly" face, however, was smiling broadly this week with the expected announcement that Ryanair would report first-quarter sales of £730m. Despite angry volcanoes and even angrier competitors, Ryanair continues its transformation from a tiny brand that had only one plane to fly between Gatwick and Waterford in 1985 into Europe's largest airline. More importantly, the brutal intelligence of Ryanair's marketing strategy has once again proved itself.

It starts with advertising. A very special kind of advertising. Usually black and white. Consistently tacky in tone and execution. And always offensive. It could be a picture of a stripper dressed as a schoolgirl announcing "hot fares". It might be a hastily copied image of Churchill declaring that to "beat terrorism" after the 7/7 attacks consumers you should fly Ryanair. Or it might be a specific attack on a famous figure. Stelios is merely the latest in a long line that includes Gordon Brown, the Pope and the president of France who have been aggressively parodied by the airline.

What follows is inevitably a public backlash or formal complaint. At this point, Ryanair kicks in with its PR campaign. O'Leary himself usually goes onto the front foot and makes even more incendiary claims: Ryanair will make people pay for toilets; there will be tickets for standing room only on flights; fat people will have to pay more; and everyone flying business class will get free sexual favours. All of it is nonsense, of course.

Few of the claims that Ryanair has made over the years are ever likely to come to pass. But that's not the point. A £25,000 ad campaign has suddenly become a million-pound piece of brand strategy. Because make no mistake, Ryanair's continued success is as much the result of building one of Europe's most distinctive brands as it is low fares. The airline itself might publicly deny any such emphasis on branding – but the greatest trick the devil ever played was making you believe he didn't exist in the first place.

At the heart of the Ryanair business model is



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See Mark Ritson appear at *The Annual, Marketing Week's new conference on 29 September 2010* www.theannual.co.uk



differentiation of the finest and most deliberate kind. I would – in all seriousness – rank Ryanair next to Hermès or Pret a Manger in terms of brand positioning and execution. Ryanair's brand associations centre on three key themes: low-price, no nonsense and aggression. Don't underestimate points two and three.

Ten years ago, there were a slew of discount airlines all competing on low prices, but all of them attempting to do so while they aped premium airlines. Only O'Leary was savvy enough to build a brand that gloried in the low-cost model and made no excuses for the no-frills approach or the aggression with which it attacked established airlines. Or as he put it himself: "For years, flying has been the preserve of rich fuckers. Now everyone can afford to fly."

Everything the airline has done since has centred on delivering a brand that consistently screams low price, aggression and no-frills – ad campaigns, the website, press conferences, and of course O'Leary himself. I have a theory that Trinity-educated O'Leary is actually quite an aesthete in his spare time. At weekends, he completes crosswords and enjoys the paintings of Velazquez. Only on Monday mornings does he look in the mirror, shout "Bollocks!" at himself and head out to deliver his very special brand of aggressive anarchy to the airline industry.

And what an asset he is. Think of all the identical old white duffers that run our brands so generically in the UK. Most would not even know what the concept of brand means, let alone their own organisation's brand positioning. In contrast, O'Leary is walking differentiation.

This is a leader who understands brand and its importance to the business and also the key role a CEO can play in reinforcing the positioning in the most basic but effective manner. Generic CEOs praise staff as the heart of their business. O'Leary's response: "MBA students come out with, 'My staff are my most important asset'. Bullshit. Staff are usually your biggest cost."

It's time to recognise Ryanair. But let's give the airline credit for what it is, as well as what it pretends to be. Yes, it's a superbly aggressive low-cost airline. But it's also one of Europe's best run brands. And while we're at it – let's reassess Michael O'Leary's status too. Rather than a scourge of CEOs, he is their living prototype.

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